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Some Preliminary Administrative Lessons of the Cuban Expedition

The main large-scale lessons of Cuba have been drawn by the President in his address to the editors. The present paper is designed to be useful in assessing internal weaknesses which can be avoided in the future. The causes of the failure of this operation are essentially military, and only secondarily political, though the consequences are almost all political and only slightly military. This is a kind of operation in which it is not easy, at best, to get good judgment. In this case there were evident complications. What is set down below implies no criticism of particular individuals; if that were the object the writer would begin with himself; the importance of these points is that they do not reflect personal failure as much as weaknesses in the situations which men found themselves placed. These can all be repaired.

First: There was a new Administration. With the best will in the world, communication and understanding are uncertain in the early days of a new Administration. In the Cuban case, men with doubts did not press them home -- and this is as true of men who favored the operation as of those who opposed it. The former did not insist on proper strength, and gave ground on many politically touchy elements they initially wanted; the latter did not insist upon their general doubts, accepting as significant such modifications as their reservations obtained. There were many reasons for this restraint, but respectful unfamiliarity with a new President was an important element.

Second: This operation necessarily required a very high degree of secrecy, and secrecy makes deliberation difficult. Plans were not held in hand to be read and reread, but distributed and collected at meetings in order to keep them secure. Outside the CIA and the Joint Staff, no close study was given to the details of the military plan; the efforts of others were limited to questioning in meetings.

Third: Neither CIA nor the Joint Staff was a reliable military counselor in this instance. Both were persuaded of the deep urgency of action against Castro, and neither was confident of the determination of the President or his nonmilitary advisers. Thus in a measure both became advocates of action, and there was no countervailing military concern for caution. Usually -- and especially in a democracy -- the pressure for military engagement comes from above down to the military,

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and military staffs think more of ensuring victory than ensuring action. In this case the reverse, unhappily, seems to have been the case. Moreover, the Joint Chiefs themselves were not close to the operation and may have felt constrained from the closest possible comment by the fact that another agency was in charge. It may be doubted whether they would have approved this operation for their own execution. CIA, on the other hand, had no true military staff of its own at a senior level. One important element in this unusual posture of military advocacy against senior political reluctance is that the preparation of the operation had been directed in an earlier administration. Thus what one President had seemed to approve had to be advocated de novo to another.

Fourth: Particularly important was the failure to estimate accurately the proficiency of the Castro forces. The responsibility for this failure must be shared outside the intelligence services. No one seems to have drawn the proper moral from abundant evidence of purges, foreign advice, and massive remilitarization. Castro's military effectiveness was put in the future, not the present -- but without evidence that now seems persuasive. Hope was the parent of belief.

Fifth: For nearly all of those engaged in deliberation, as distinct from advocacy, this operation received far too little time. Men to whom the President had a right to look for independent and personal counsel did not find the time to reach judgments based on careful evaluation. (An honorable exception here is Mr. Schlesinger, who carefully and repeatedly pressed his doubts.) Time was a serious pressure against adequate consideration at every stage.

Sixth: In the pressure of argument about the pros and cons of the operation, those between the Administration and the Cuban force failed to communicate adequately to either one the full views and feelings of the other. Thus the President repeatedly emphasized that he wanted a landing that would be quiet, and that could readily, and in a measure successfully, convert itself into guerrilla operations. This does not appear to have been seriously communicated to the Cubans, or planned for in any thoughtful way. The swamp to which survivors have fled is most unlikely to be a safe hideout. The advocates of the operation did not really believe, in their hearts, in the usefulness of the guerrilla option, but they did not share the disbelief with the President, or seriously communicate his quite opposite view to the Cubans.

At the same time the Cubans had expectations -- and strong ones -- of which the President was inadequately informed. They counted

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heavily, as did the U. S. planners, on complete removal of enemy air, and they must always have assumed that the Navy would do it if necessary. They assumed that supplies were a certainty, not a chancy business. They were certainly told not to expect direct U. S. intervention, but we must suppose that they did not deeply accept this warning; the messages received in the last agonies show the hope of active help, and no notion whatever of a skillful move to the bush.

Seventh: A quite excessive emphasis was placed, in the end, on the need to do "something" with the Guatemala force. It had to get out of Guatemala (though even this "necessity" seems less than complete in retrospect -- further hospitality could perhaps have been bought), and it seemed impossible to keep it as a real force in being elsewhere (though this also could have been done). Thus there seemed to be a prospect of losing an excellent weapon which could never be reconstituted, and of receiving heavy criticism from refugees and Americans for appeasing Castro. All those who have wrongly believed that Castro was ready to fall at a touch would surely have been noisy in complaint. Even in retrospect this course does not seem a good one, and surely the brigade could have been kept alive, and tripled in strength, if that had been the firm decision of the government -- though this would have involved real strains with many friendly countries. But even disbanding the brigade, with all its consequences, would have been better, at least in the short run, than what happened.

Eighth: The moments of decision were not always isolated and treated with the gravity they deserved. Certain special circumstances contributed to this result, but it remains urgent that both the President and all his advisers watch closely for points of no return -- even partial or interim decisions can strongly change the shape of the problem and so become decisive.

Ninth: This whole operation raises the great question whether there can be such a thing as large-scale covert activity in a society like ours. Many of the hopes of those who concurred in this enterprise were pinned to the notion that it could be a quiet one. The very wide distance between this notion and what really happened is not to be explained by any particular minor specific failures of security or tactical planning. It appears to be an inescapable conclusion that in peacetime conditions ~~the~~ United States cannot do things on this scale in private.

Tenth, and most important: In prolonged balancing and rebalancing of marginal elements of this operation, all concerned managed to forget -- or not to learn -- the fundamental importance of success in this sort of effort.

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Limitations were accepted that should have been avoided, and hopes were indulged that should have been sternly put aside. Many of the lesser mistakes or failures listed above can be explained largely by the failure to recall this basic rule.

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The morals of those failures are readily drawn: First, the President's advisors must speak up in council. Second, secrecy must never take precedence over careful thought and study. Third, the President and his advisors must second-guess even military plans. Fourth, we must estimate the enemy without hope or fear. Fifth, those who are to offer serious advice on major issues must themselves do the necessary work. Sixth, the President's desires must be fully acted on, and he must know the full state of mind of friends whose lives his decisions affect. Seventh, forced choices are seldom as necessary as they seem, and the fire can be much hotter than the frying pan. Eighth, what is and is not implied in any specific partial decision must always be thought through. Ninth: What is large in scale must always be open, with all the consequences of openness. Tenth: Success is what succeeds.

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